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THE BEARING OF ENGLISH STUDIES UPON THE NATIONAL LIFE[1]

Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.

GOETHE.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION.—English studies may, as educational instruments, be either exceptionally barren or exceptionally fruitful. A condition of their value, that they be carried on neither out of touch with, nor in exclusive connexion with, any one of the three great domains: *science*, or explanation, *art*, or creation, *conduct*, or morality (p. 2). The study of English literature under these conditions leads to an apprehension, not otherwise to be won, of what may be roughly called the mind of England (p. 3).

I. Beginning with the kinds of literature which simply relate or reproduce. *Ballads*. The unconscious sifting out of the unessential. Tradition, shedding off inexpressive facts, takes the mould of the tribal or national mind. Conscious selection by a poet with the same result. The *Canterbury Tales* (p. 5). Chaucer's picture of fourteenth-century England owes its profound veracity to the fact that he was writing as a poet, not as a chronicler; to amuse, not to instruct (p. 6). Again, while history records event, literature fills in the quiet interstices of the national life, the unsensational happenings which signify and denote, but do not *disturb* (ib.). Shallow and Silence. The Old Cumberland Beggar.

II. But literature has not simply to record or reproduce (p. 7). Imaginative transmutation of fact its way to truth, as individual vision its way to universality. English literature exceptionally rich in individuality. 'These islanders are themselves all islands.' Classicism and Romanticism. The characteristic 'sociality' (Brunetière) of French literature (p. 8). Individualism, in comparison, of the Germanic world. Mme de Staël's contrast of Germany and France. The English Augustan age less vital and significant, as an expression of national life, than the French (p. 9). The 'national' quality of the Elizabethans. But they are greater as poets of the soul than of the State. Shakespeare's Histories and his Tragedies.

III. Subsequent literature has never been so closely in touch with the national life (p. 11). Antagonisms and limitations. Puritanism. The Town. The Country. Yet each limitation has marked a conquest as well as a loss, the horizons of the national mind were permanently enlarged, and only temporarily curtailed. Milton's poetry of spiritual freedom. Wordsworth and the humanity of Nature. Shelley and Keats. Contribution of the poets to our intellectual and spiritual outlook. Mr. Courthope's indictment of the poets of the revolutionary age for having detached poetry from the national life ignores this contribution, and involves an inadequate conception of the relation of the two. England, as interpreted through her practical activities, and through her poetry. Testimony of the English language to the imaginative elements of the national mind (p. 13). Final claim for English studies.

ENGLISH is, whatever else may be said of it or against it, one of the most plastic, the most Protean, of studies. It will shrivel up into something very near the insignificance and aridity of dust, or expand until it touches the heights and the depths of humanity. English grammar, analysis, and parsing, are perhaps of all subjects those in which the natural vitality has been most nearly crushed out by scholastic pedantry; and even a play of Shakespeare, treated as a preserve for

[1] An address delivered to the members of the Manchester Branch of the English Association, March 4, 1910.

hard words, is not much better. But the English language, expounded by a Jespersen or a Henry Bradley, becomes a part of our national being, a sign and symbol of our national character; nearer to us than hands and feet, but endowed with a more searching, not with a colder, appeal, because it is so near. And English literature, expounded by a Ten Brink or an Andrew Bradley, becomes the explicit mind of England, seen in its most luminous and most pregnant moments. No subject can, in unwise hands, mean less; none can, worthily handled, mean more.

This worthy handling may take different forms. But it may be laid down, I think, that the study of literature wants something if it be either wholly out of touch with, or wholly absorbed into, any one of three great provinces of human endeavour, three modes of the human spirit, which we may roughly denote by the names *science*, *art*, and *conduct*.

We cannot, in the first place, afford either to ignore, or to push to the logical limit, the view that literature is a product of society, ultimately reducible to laws like society itself. Literary history can never be reduced to a perfectly ordered body of knowledge, fulfilling the ideal of science; nevertheless it must remain an aim of critical research to seek to order it, to penetrate deeper and deeper into the infinitely subtle webs of causation which make the poem what it is; to trace, with Taine, the threads of affiliation which attach these delicate creations to the race they spring from and the soil in which they grow; to detect the working of traditional manner and traditional mood; or to follow out by the 'Darwinian' methods of Brunetière, the descent and development of literary species through successive generations; to exhibit, for instance, the stately eloquence of Bourdaloue and Massillon, persisting through the intimate and personal prose of Rousseau, in the lyrism of Hugo and de Vigny.

But even if the reduction of literature to scientific laws admitted of being carried out far further than it does, we should have to take account of facts for which continuous and orderly growth is a less obviously apt analogy than that of the wind blowing where it listeth. However far we can push the methodizing operations of research, we encounter sooner or later potencies which seem to be utterly unique and individual, which give us sensations and feelings distinct from any we have had or can have elsewhere; which we can delight in and in some degree describe, but cannot explain. Nay, to critics of the Symbolist school the quality of literature only begins when it becomes thus inexplicable, mysterious. What we call the *magic* of style depends in great part upon just this seeming want of consonance between the conditions and the result: to three sounds you add a fourth, and get 'not a fourth sound, but a star'. And it is hardly a paradox to say that those who have the keenest feeling for the magical qualities of style will often be the most successful investigators of its laws; certainly, without it, the most painstaking collection of facts is apt to become mechanical blundering. The instincts and sensibilities that make for art are here the best guarantee of scientific aptitude—of the power to detect law, to group, affiliate, classify. You cannot classify without a keen sense of values, but it is equally true that the sense of values is quickened by the comparison with which classification begins. You cannot make a rational statement of the relation between Dickens and

Thackeray, for instance, without a keen sense of literary values; but the attempt to work out the relation quickens the sense. It is one of the ways in which close contact with literature makes signally for mental and moral health, that it induces us instinctively to get the better of our hard and fast distinctions, leading us, as it were, to a loftier point of vantage from which our absolute categories appear to meet, as all roads lead to Rome.

And as with the distinction between science and art, so with the distinction between knowledge and practice, between art and life. It is possible to study and to teach literary facts, like the facts of astronomy or of Babylonian history, without touching any spring of action, or giving any bias or stimulus to will. It is possible perhaps to teach even great literature in this way. But no teaching of literature can be completely alive which leaves the recipient merely a vessel replenished, and not an organism quickened, and so more healthily disposed for all its functions. This does not mean that morals, or ideas about morality, are embodied in all literature; nor that, when no 'moral' is discoverable, one is to be manufactured and put in; but that all true literature, because it conveys more life and fuller than our own, brings with it an implicit criticism of the narrow and pallid life we actually live, places us in an atmosphere which suspends, and in the end slowly saps, the sway of our harder and duller egoisms, and endows us, in the depth of our province or of our suburb, with something of the citizenship of humanity.

Now, the attempt to be just to all these ideals of literary study—to grasp literature as a growth—in part a product, in part an inexplicable creative force,—and also as a stimulating disclosure of reality, brings us to a kind of knowledge not otherwise to be had, of the nationality out of which it grows, to whose growth it contributes, and whose being it represents. To say that English literature is the mind of England becoming articulate in English speech is, in strictness, hyperbole, no doubt; but it is hyperbole of the kind which overstates only the most pregnant and suggestive aspect of the truth. The relation of literature to nationality cannot be simply expressed; the figures of speech in which we try to express it never contain the whole truth, or nothing but the truth, but they all contain some truth. The literature of a people, we may say, is fruit, but it is also seed; it is a mirror, reflecting the age, but one, no less, in which the age, seeing itself, may better the reflection; it is a robe, sometimes closely following the contours of the body, sometimes fluttering gaily in the breeze of fancy, but never wholly escaping its control; it is a versatile, a myriad-minded interpreter, whose speech is often indirect and elusive, conveyed in figure and symbol, in terms of a past that has vanished, or of a future not yet in sight, but is never really irrelevant, or otiose.

I

Let me now attempt to illustrate some of the ways in which the study of English literature brings us to the kind of knowledge of our country and people, not otherwise obtainable, to which I have referred. A large and delightful body of literature—most ballads, and many 'historical' dramas and novels—aims, in some sort, at telling what happened, at

reproducing the past. So far as literature does this, it evidently bears a close relation to written history. But the historian, as such, cannot get away from the matter of fact; he can neither step aside from, nor outstep, the record. Nations, like individuals, rarely understand themselves, they do not know what they were meant for nor what they mean, and they are apt to blunder round about the meaning they suppose themselves to have. Life is a blind force, surging into event and action, into personality and character, into thought and passion and speech; and its blindness betrays it often into a kind of stupidity. The idle, inexpressive things happen; the significant and expressive things do not happen, or are not noticed, or are not recorded. The historian may choose and sift as he will, but he cannot, beyond certain limits, reconstruct, or invent. Even if it be granted that the ultimate nature of things is richer and deeper than our divining mind, yet the actual record of that ultimate nature in history is fragmentary, and in the earlier times bald and meagre, and the most brilliant reproduction and analysis of that record must in some degree remain bald and meagre too. It is here that literature often interposes an invaluable aid. It may sometimes provide the historian with genuinely historical material. A German landsknecht of the sixteenth century, for instance, putting the tale of his day's fighting into rude stanzas at the supper-table of a country tavern, made 'historical ballads' in which the history is usually better than the verse. He tells what he saw done, and especially what he did himself; and he only differs from the chronicler in having been on the spot, and seen, not read or heard, what he tells. But it may also happen that a number of such literal records, by different hands, gradually resolve themselves, in the process of oral tradition, into a single story, composed, by a kind of spontaneous and unconscious selection, of the incidents and situations which took most powerful hold of the successive reciters and their hearers; while the indifferent or tedious or repulsive things dropped out or were quietly replaced by things of keener grip. This final story—the story, say, of the *Iliad* or of the *Nibelungenlied*—is clearly less historical, in the sense that it is a less faithful account of what actually happened, than the original matter-of-fact reports; but it may be, in another sense, more historical, in so far as, in losing the impress of the actual events it has taken on the impress of the mind and character of the people to which it was thus gradually accommodated. Achilles, or Siegfried, or Beowulf, or Robin Hood, may be quite inadmissible to the pages of the scientific historian as actors in any definite historic events; but the historian who is scientific in the true sense will be the last to dispense with these incomparable types of what Homeric Greece, or Hohenstauffen Germany, or pagan Angeln, or the yeomanry and woodlanders of Plantagenet England, most wanted to be, and in their best moments, the moments when they most fully and richly lived, in effect were. For this process, by which a historic matter becomes soaked and saturated as it were in the national character, is something quite different from that in which the ideal hero is consciously designed by the poet of a later age, and made to figure perhaps in some quasi-antique picture. Whatever the virtue, as poetic creations, of Tennyson's Arthur, or Vergil's Aeneas, they are not English or Roman as Achilles is Greek. Arthur has far less English blood in him than Tennyson himself—the Tennyson of Carlyle's vignette—the 'fine large-featured, . . .

bronze-coloured, shaggy-headed Alfred, dusty, smoky, free, and easy, . . . a most restful, brotherly, solid-hearted man'; even of English soul he has but a thin extract, and not quite of the best. In all modern literature there is but one example of a legendary figure in whom the inmost soul and heart, the passion and the dreams, the raptures and the agonies, the achievements and the sins, of a great people have embodied themselves,—the Faust of Goethe.

But there are, fortunately, other ways besides this of traditional selection in which literature may do for the study of the national past, at once less and more, than history proper. The same kind of sifting and elimination and concentration may go on, not in the passage of a story through a succession of minds, but in the working of a single mind upon its own experience. If England is poor in poetry of inherited tradition, no nation is richer in literature of large, penetrating, and genial observation. If we have no *Iliad* and no *Nibelungen*, we have Chaucer; if we have no *Faust*, we have a line of great portrayers of the national life from Fielding to Meredith, not equalled in range and fidelity, if sometimes surpassed in brilliance of style and weight of meaning, by those of any other people. In all that goes to make a poem or novel a living epitome of a people, the *Canterbury Tales* stand at the head of them all.

Chaucer's nine-and-twenty pilgrims may never have sallied out of the Tabard, and paused at the second milestone to draw lots for the first tale; in any case they told their tales with but a measure of his wonderful art; but in them we have, nevertheless, the gist and marrow of innumerable companies of men and women brought together by the spell of the young spring-time from all the shires of England for a holiday-tour to the blessed martyr's shrine. You see a hundred things which do not emerge there, you read minds and motives, and subtle shades of manner, delicate traits of affectation, nuances of breeding, which it needed the elvish eye of a Chaucer to discern and to set down; you see the Prioress with her coy and simple smile, and her fastidious, dainty breeding; and the shy recluse scholar, who loved better than viol or psaltery to have at his bed-head twenty books, bound in black and red, of Aristotle and his philosophy. This lively company rides forth in the most natural way imaginable, like any other troop of wayfarers thrown together by chance, and bound for the same goal; yet in them pulses the very heart of fourteenth-century England; in their features, their demeanour, their by-play, we may detect, more clearly than in any chronicle, the connexion and interworking of all the factors that dominated, or struggled for dominance, in its society. Chivalry, fast growing out of date, but recalled to a brief and brilliant aftermath by Edward III, lives in the knight with the soil of war and travel on his doublet, but of untamed vigour and nobly courteous to high and low, and in his son. The new power of the sea lives in the savage sea-dog of the west country, who sent his prisoners home by water and tapped the cargo of Bordeaux while its owners slept, but, all the same, was a master of sea-craft, and knew every haven and every current from Gothland to Finisterre. We see the feudal tenant, who has become, by the astute aid and counsel of the law, an independent landowner, in the ruddy-faced franklin who loves well a sop of wine and keeps open house for all the countryside, and who goes along beside his good friend the wise and wary serjeant, like the squire and

the family solicitor of to-day; we see the rising power of the towns and the townsfolk, which was to transform the mediaeval into the modern state, in the Merchant, the Lawyer, and the genial and masterful Host; even in the four substantial though inarticulate burgesses, spick and span with their new dresses and their silver-hilted knives, fresh from the shop, never soiled by service; whom Chaucer so slily contrasts with the shabby but glorious knight.

It is clear that in all this we have a mass of strictly historical information; and further, that the abundance and precision of it are not due merely to the fact that Chaucer had extraordinary gifts of eye and style. They are due mainly to the fact that he was writing as a poet, not as a historian, to delight and amuse his hearers, not to inform them. He would not have been so brimfull of instruction for us if he had aimed at instructing his readers. What should they need to be told of an everyday matter like the pilgrimage to Canterbury? They had all probably been wayfarers along the same well-trodden road and put up at the same familiar hostelries. If Chaucer had been a chronicler he would have disposed of the matter, if he mentioned it at all, in a simple entry such as this: '1385: In April of this year men went on pilgrimage to Canterbury, according to their wont. They had much joyous pastime on the way, and gave a goodly supper at the Tabard, on their return, to one of their company who had best acquitted him in that sport.' In other words, a host of things get left out of the chronicler's record because they are common and matter of course, which are taken up into the poet's because, for him, the common ways of men and their matter-of-course habits and usages are full of the zest of life; common as blood and breath, and matter of course as the beating of the heart.

History for the most part records only the salient incidents, the violent interruptions which disturb the silent continuity of ordinary life, and are so interesting to read about, so disagreeable to undergo. When these are few, the annals are brief; or if they are not brief they are apt to be dull; and though we allow that the people were probably happy, we cannot quite forgive them for being happy in such a stupid and uninteresting way. The historian as such has to do with change, not with standing still; if he describes stationary conditions at all it is as the result of, or the preparation for, change. And, on the whole, people who live an uneventful life are out of his sphere; they are, so to speak, not playing his game. But it is just here that literature, with its more brooding eye, and its more profound concern with life itself, not merely with the arresting or sensational moments of life, steps in, and does for us something which the historian quite properly neglects to do, but which is nevertheless needful to be done.

It is hardly to the dramatist that we should naturally look for this illumination of the quiet undistinguished spaces of commonplace lives; for he outdoes even the historian in his normal demand for salient and moving events, and in the pace at which they sweep through his pages. Yet the same hand which evolved in five acts the colossal story of Lear, and hurried us breathless through the length and breadth of the Roman empire to witness the shame and the glory of Antony, and the witch-splendour of his serpent of old Nile, that same hand can linger to record a bit of homely talk, devoid of either wit or humour, wisdom or pathos, between two simple-minded Gloucestershire squires as they

sit over their morning ale; just such talk as might happen any market-day anywhere in all the English countryside :

'Jesu, Jesu,' exclaims Mr. Justice Shallow, 'the mad days that I have spent! and to see how many of my old acquaintance are dead!'
'We shall all follow, cousin,' rejoins Master Silence.
'Certain, 'tis certain; very sure, very sure; death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all; all shall die. How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford fair?
Sil. By my troth, I was not there.
Shall. Death is certain. Is old Double of your town living yet?
Sil. Dead, sir.
Shall. Jesu, Jesu, dead! a' drew a good bow; and dead! a' shot a fine shoot: John a Gaunt loved him well, and betted much money on his head. Dead! a' would have clapped i' the clout at twelve score, and carried you a forehand shaft a fourteen and fourteen and a half, that it would have done a man's heart good to see. How a score of ewes now?
Sil. Thereafter as they be: a score of good ewes may be worth ten pounds.
Shall. And is old Double dead?'

Or I might recall, as a picture of life even further removed from the stress and onrush of history, nearer to the absolute quietude of death, yet more intense and poignantly expressive, Wordsworth's Cumberland Beggar—the solitary bowed old man, who has all but died out of humanity into the silence and the calm of Nature, and yet has his place among the influences which make the little countryside community morally so fresh and sound, by keeping alive in them the pity which runneth soon in gentle hearts. That tells us more about Cumberland than many a ballad of Border raids.

II

I have been, so far, concerned with literature only as a sort of ally of history, throwing open her casements and letting in a piquant and concentrated, but clear and transparent, daylight upon both the broad highways and the shy nooks and recesses of national life. But this is, after all, not what literature has chiefly to do. Her casements, when they are hers, are magic casements; her light is not the light of common day; if she contributes, in the end, to a fuller and deeper knowledge of reality, it is, more often, not by using good normal eyes to unusually good purpose, but by the absorbed exercise of rare idiosyncrasies of vision, purblind perhaps in many directions, amazingly acute in some. And we have now to ask how the utterances which reflect these individual forms of vision, these originalities of sense and thought, may also enlarge our understanding of the national life. The question is the more urgent for us, since these original and individual seers have so large and significant a part in the literature of England. No other literature perhaps numbers so many lonely voices. 'These islanders,' said a foreign critic once, very pregnantly, 'are themselves all islands.' For literatures, and periods of literature, are not alike in their relation to the common life out of which they grow. The famous critical feud between classicism and romanticism sprang largely from a difference in the value attached to that common life. To the critic of the classical or Augustan type, good writing could never be out of touch with good sense; the ideal of literature was *proprie communia dicere,* to put the common intellectual heritage

into apt and felicitous words. The Romantics, on the other hand, of every shade, have scornfully repudiated the claim of 'common sense' to be a standard either in literature or in life; they have pursued ideals, in both, sharply contrasted with those of the mass of the community. The generation of Rousseau called their ideal 'Nature', and preached a religion of the mountains, exempt from the corruptions of the town; the generation of Tieck and Schlegel called it 'Art', and proclaimed a religion of the studio, exempt from the vulgar actuality of the bourgeois, unfriendly to the clarity of science and to the coherence of logic. Beauty, for them, was apt to be something cloistered, or exotic, a revelation of the exalted moment or of the fevered dream; and poetry became an exclusive antithesis to 'prose', the creation of a wayward and irresponsible fancy, not the fine flower of universal reason, nor the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.

France has had her age of brilliant romanticism; England her age of hardly less brilliant classicism. But it will not be denied that the *sociality* of which classicism is the most pronounced literary expression, has on the whole been, as Brunetière declared, a distinctive trait of French literature at large; nor that the individualism, to which the Romantics paid a homage often more ardent than discreet, has been potent through almost the whole range of the modern literature of England. The spirit of a polished and authoritative society, imposing a common standard of manners, speech, and even of thought, has never been strange to the land which became the mistress of Europe in courtly usage and breeding; and in the great age of Louis XIV it told almost as a creative and inspiring force, embodying itself in the noble drama of Racine and Corneille, in the more universal and human comedy of Molière, in the criticism of Boileau, in the dogma of Bossuet; all addressed to, and presupposing, a society which applied, and was able in a large degree to enforce, a definite and uniform standard of rightness and fitness in art. 'The heretic is the man who has an opinion,' said Bossuet, the mightiest ecclesiastical voice of the seventeenth century; exactly as he might have said that the ill-bred person was one whose manners were of his own making; and never has the spirit, which brands having an opinion as heresy, been a more potent determining factor in literature; where, it might be thought, to have an opinion was the first condition of being entitled to speak at all. However that may be, there is no question that the literary orthodoxy of the great age of France succeeded; not in the sense that it crushed the literary heretics, though it did that too, but in the sense that it was justified in crushing them. The Chapelains and Voitures, whom Boileau denounced, were not the obscure heralds of a larger day, like Chatterton or Shelley, but delusive and pretentious *ignes fatui*, whose slender and fitful tapers led nowhere. A part, at least, of the secret of that orthodox success lay in this, that through the voice of fashion, through the voice of an authoritative society spoke the more potent and more enduring voice, I will not say of the genius of France, but at least of the dominant and master strain of the complex and versatile French mind. In that classical literature, with its fastidious clarity, its ordered beauty, its logical control, some of the traits which contributed most to build up French nationality, and qualified it to play its colossal part in the making of modern civilization, found their fullest

expression. Hence the French classics have never been out of date; through all the vicissitudes of taste they have retained their appeal, and found their response; and no literature of which that can be said can be insignificant.

Nothing quite like this is to be found in the Germanic world. The 'taste of the town' has rarely, in England or in Germany, been a clue to immortal merit; and if our criticism has often displayed a nice scent for the exceptional in literature, it has most often been in order to proclaim the discovery of a new poetic Eldorado, not to brand a heretic for having an opinion of his own. Germany, in this point, stands in yet sharper contrast with France than England. When that brilliant Frenchwoman, Mme de Staël, was banished across the Rhine by Napoleon, she was struck by the totally different state of things. There she found no uniform society, no exacting and uniform standard, no orthodoxy of manners, thought, or speech; but instead, a rich diversity of individual talent and individual taste. 'The superiority of the Germans consists,' she says, 'in their independence of mind, in their individual originality; whereas in France the imposition of a uniform model, noble, agreeable, and refined though it be, represses originality and plays into the hands of mediocrity.' In those years, when Napoleon had shattered the very semblance of political cohesion in the German people, it was pardonable for a foreigner to miss the signs of inner spiritual accord in this Babel of individual voices; but she saw, rightly, that there was no social accord, no alliance between literature and society or the state. But the spiritual bond, however faintly expressed in the outward structure of the Germany of 1816, was the sign of forces that were inwardly working towards full nationality, and Bismarck in 1870 only fashioned a political body for the matured soul. To-day, Goethe and Schiller are more intimately bound up with the national consciousness of Germany than any French poet, even Molière, even Victor Hugo, with the national consciousness of France. And they have done far more than either to give the national consciousness its ideal content and scope.

And how does it stand with our own country? England, as a political society, has had a history far more comparable with that of France than with that of Germany. It has had for many centuries a highly organized political structure, a strong central government, a great capital, and an extremely pronounced and even aggressive national self-consciousness. But the powerful sociality which made England the mother of parliaments has certainly not been a prevailing trait of our literary history. If in political England Mme de Staël would have found the nearest analogue to political France, in literary England she might have heard a parallel to that Babel of lonely voices which charmed her ear in Germany. For whether or not the English music has really been richer or more varied than the French, it can hardly be disputed that the musicians have cared much less for the conductor; in other words, that the element of authority, of tradition, of a standard and model imposed by an exacting and united society, has had very much less to do with our songs. The established orthodoxy of the great French classical school has no close analogy among us; certainly the English Augustans who sought to displace the riot and caprice of English fancy with a reasoned and ordered lucidity like theirs,

did not speak, as the French Augustans did, with the full accent, the profound conviction, or the enduring result of those in whose words the master-strains of national character become articulate. The school of Pope is not exactly that parenthesis in the history of the national mind which it is in the history of the national poetry; but it may fairly be described as one of those paragraphs of a great chapter which communicate matters highly needful to be known, rather than the very pith and burden of the tale. And when we turn to the Elizabethans, there indeed, if anywhere, we seem to be in the presence of an exalted and exultant national life. But their pervading temper is hardly that 'sociality' which Brunetière laid down as the cardinal trait of the classical literature of France. If they, and the audiences they wrote for, formed, as they did, a very real society, it was a society whose most vital bond was not an inherited tradition, a common culture, or a common standard of taste jealously exacted and observed, but rather a common delight in the glorious extravagances of individual character, which break away from, if they do not break through, the norms of custom, the sanctions of tradition. The thrill with which a spectator in the pit of the Rose watched the colossal Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, trample upon the nations, or Faustus sign his soul away, had some horror in it; but reverence for laws divine or human contended in him, on less than equal terms, with an insurgent joy at the Titanic hardihood which dared to defy them. In the vaster and maturer intelligence of Shakespeare, these conflicts of the individual with society assume less obvious forms and are fraught with more perplexing problems. They are the absorbing theme of his tragedy. And it is with him normally society that outwardly triumphs, and the individual who outwardly succumbs. But that does not prevent the intellectual, ethical, and imaginative interest from being focused upon what is going on in the soul of the ruined victim. Shakespeare's insight into the structure and working of society, profound as it was, is not to be compared with his understanding of personality; nor his interest in the diseases of the state with his interest in the maladies of the soul; the rottenness of Denmark is only there to give occasion to the thought-sickness of Hamlet. And it is in these supreme studies of personality, of personality desperately entangled in the web of its own faculties and failings, far more than in his studies of societies or states, even of societies successfully asserting themselves, of states triumphing, of England herself rising up from the disasters wrought in her by weakling or despot kings, that the supreme worth of Shakespeare, even for the English citizen, lies. The series of the English histories, great and splendid as they are, are not to be set in the balance here. Henry, vaulting upon his horse before Shrewsbury—

> As full of spirit as the month of May,
> And gorgeous as the sun at midsummer,

or scattering a universal largess of heart and hope among his troops before Agincourt, means less for the culture of Englishmen than do Hamlet or Lear, apparently detached from all local or national significance, but more potent, by their wider range and deeper reach, to build us up in the humanity which is not a negation of citizenship, but its crown and flower, that without which citizenship itself becomes merely an expanded parochialism.

III

Yet with all this, literature has never again been in such close touch with the national life of its own day as it was among the great Elizabethans. The generation which followed Shakespeare's death saw the rift in the common consciousness already growing wide, which was never again to be wholly healed. The loftiest and most resonant literary voices were thenceforth partial and exclusive, as Spenser's and Shakespeare's were not. Milton, after his glorious early prime at Horton, averted his ken from half the contemporary world of England, and that half gave no heed, or scornful heed, to him. The Augustans put into exquisite epigrams and antitheses the philosophy, manners, culture, and follies of the town, but had no eyes for the country. The Romantics who gradually recovered imagination and passion and song for English poetry, sought them in the recluse solitude of woodland hermitages, or country churchyards at nightfall, or the meandering Ouse meadows, or the bracken heights of Quantock, or the Grasmere hills; but they ignored, or fiercely denounced, the town. All these partial by-ways of literature involved some loss; compared with the spacious times of Elizabeth, all these latter-day literary movements were in one way or another limited, their limitations were even striking and extraordinary. Every boy and girl can now be made to see more in Herrick than Milton saw, more in Pope than Warton saw, more in Wordsworth than Byron saw. But the really important thing is, that each of these limited movements marked also a gain, a discovery, a creation, the addition of a new asset to the spiritual wealth of the nation. Milton's limitations, his Puritan hardness and austerity, his rigid and arid theology, his insensibility to the ideal aspects of love, these flaws were the mortal and perishable part of him. But what shall we say of his enduring, immortal part? There had been heroism enough in England, enough stout resistance to despotic authority; enough of strenuous intellectual devotion to a chosen task. But who does not feel that these virtues acquired, in passing through Milton's sublime spirit, a kind of divine afflatus, which gave them henceforth a stronger hold upon English mind and character? Milton's picture of the courage which 'never can submit or yield', his prophetic plea for spiritual liberty, his noble hymn of a consecrated youth, have made these things loom larger in our apprehension. What had been scarcely conscious habits of select and exceptional persons, were made, by Milton's magnificent imaginings, permanent spiritual points of repair, at which, in the future, again and again, the fainter purposes of Englishmen have gathered strength, and their despondency courage and hope. 'Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour!' cried Wordsworth; but Milton, who could thus be called to, in words which have resounded and reverberated in thousands of English hearts, was indeed alive; a great spiritual force permanently added to the heritage and birthright of Englishmen. Such a national celebration as that of two years ago was not merely a payment of due honour to his memory; it was a recognition, conscious or not, that Milton is a part of us, that he not merely interpreted the England he knew, but helped to constitute the spirit and temper of the England in which we live.

Milton, a lonely voice in his own time, is thus a *sign* of an England still to come. If we turn to the poets of the next century who brought about what we know as the Romantic revival, we find ourselves among voices even lonelier, often, than his, which were the signs, and in part the instruments, of changes in the spiritual outlook of England still more distinct and decisive than those foreshadowed by him. In what chiefly was the nineteenth century richer than the seventeenth ? Surely, in its more intimate, sympathetic understanding of Nature and Man. Everywhere it turned away impatiently, like Faust, from the traditional scholasticisms, and drew into close and first-hand contact with living reality. It did not, as Wordsworth in a hasty moment bade it, reject science and art, in order to listen to the woodland linnet ; but it created a science and an art of its own just by listening and looking, by the frank, fearless, and penetrating use of the senses and imagination. It let the old school divinity moulder, and rediscovered the divine. It found Nature mysterious, yet full of speaking voices, whose rhythms our ears could partly catch, and our souls fall into tune with, the source of a veritable new religion, of which Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey was the gospel. And it found human nature mysterious, yet strangely vocal too ; a mine unfathomable, but of which the visible treasures are so rich that Wordsworth, contemplating it with wonder and awe, as something to which the heaven of heavens is but a veil, could yet make it 'the haunt and the main region of his song'. The interpretation of Nature, in their different ways, by the geologist, the naturalist, and the landscape-painter, the deepening and widening of the self-consciousness of humanity, seen in the growth of the democratic ideal, the more and more absorbed study of history, the recovery of sympathetic insight into the myths of man's infancy, into the Hellenic or the Gothic art of his adolescence,—all these were kindred manifestations of a vast enlargement of the mental and moral horizon, in which the whole of Western Europe in different degrees took part, and without an insight into which the nineteenth century cannot be understood. Now, whatever may be the case on the Continent, in England it is certain that these various manifestations found their subtlest and deepest interpreters and exponents in the poets ; nay, that the poetic voices, lifted up, 'long before the blissful hour arrived,' to chant, as Wordsworth said, the consummation of that union of man's discerning intellect with this goodly universe, had some considerable share in bringing it about. Gray and Collins, Chatterton and Blake, Cowper and Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, all in various degrees had to wait for their audience, and the audience they eventually found they helped to create. If we can see Nature in part through Shelley's eyes, and hear her through his rhythms, if the imagination of the cultivated Englishman of to-day is sensitive and receptive to beauties which left the cultivated Englishman of his time cold, it is because the Shelleyan poetry, beating as it were upon the senses of English readers for two generations, gradually attuned them to respond,—fashioned the Aeolian harp on which its passing breath made music. We now understand and relish them all more intimately than their contemporaries did ; they are 'signs' of our England in a sense in which they were not the 'products' of their own.

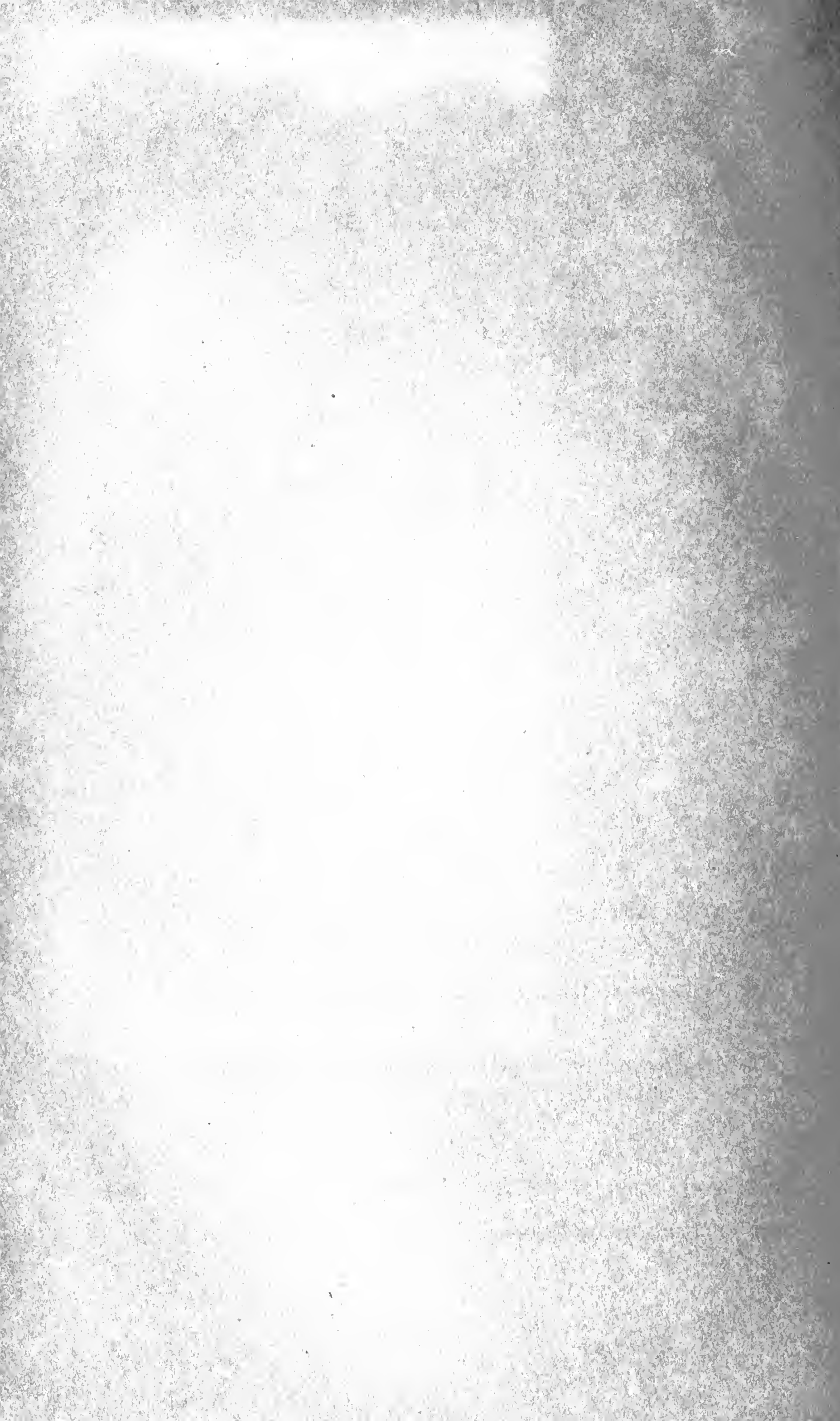
Mr. Courthope, in the closing volume of his valuable *History of English Poetry*, has brought against these Romantic poets an indictment which rather nearly concerns us here. Conceiving all poetry, of an enduring

kind, to be a clothing in figure and verse of the body of national tradition in institution and belief, so that the poet's audience find their ideas reflected in his work, he naturally regards with little interest this poetry of the revolutionary age, of which the most vital substance, certainly, though by no means the whole content, was new creation. 'In this concluding volume,' he says, 'I have sought to describe the varied effects produced on the English imagination by the French Revolution, and the numerous individual attempts made by poets of genius to evolve, out of their own imagination, new forms of the art, unconnected with the stream of national tradition. But just as the principle of abstract liberty has proved unequal to the task of building up a fresh social order in the sphere of politics, so, in the corresponding world of imagination, the last result of the Romantic Movement has been a separation of Poetry from the organized course of national life and action.' And feeling that poetry thus separated misses its end, the historian of Poetry has chosen here to lay down his pen, and to leave the rest of its story, from Shelley's days to our own, so far as he is concerned, untold. These poets were, for him, abandoning the poetry which expresses the mind of the community, to follow little private avenues of individual fancy. Such value as their work possesses must be found in the beauty which it contrives incidentally to capture, while steadily denuding itself of substance, interest, and universal truth.

This view seems to involve two fallacies in regard to the relation between poetry and national life. The first is the assumption that the poet's audience, the body of hearers to whom and in terms of whose ideas he speaks, is that which he finds; whereas we have just seen that his audience is often, and always in some degree, one which he makes; to which he speaks in terms of ideas which belong to it chiefly because they have first belonged to *him*. In this way, ideas which begin by being individual, and which the individual thinker has won by pushing his way through just these lonely avenues of private thought, may end in being a common possession; and the national mind is to that extent enlarged and enriched. Wordsworth, it is hardly too much to say, has created a new sensibility, a new capacity for joy; he has added to the influences which, in England, make for plain living and high thinking, for fortitude and patient cheer, for the power to live 'by admiration, hope, and love'. And the second fallacy, closely connected with this is, that in gauging the national mind, understanding its present and its past, and forecasting its future, that part of the national mind which stamps itself in the laws, in the established institutions, in the orthodox beliefs, in the obligatory customs, need alone be considered. England, as we read her in her business, in her amusements, in nine-tenths of her legislation, in three-quarters of her religion, is a nation shrewd, practical, common-sense, tolerant of differences by political instinct, but as poorly endowed as any people on record with the sympathetic imagination which interprets them. Yet with all this, England has been the mother of a series of poets whose imagination was their supreme gift. 'By nothing,' as Matthew Arnold said, 'is England so great as by her poetry.' The wonderful language we use, soiled and corrupted as it may be in the music-hall or the baser journalism, cannot forget that it has been moulded in the brains of singers as well as in those of 'shop-keepers'; and to-day we have the astonishing spectacle that the same speech which

serves perfectly to convey the political convictions of the practical Anglo-Saxon in the columns of the *Times*, can become, on the lips of the eager dreaming Celt beyond the Irish Sea, in the verse of Yeats, in the prose of Synge, an idiom so exquisite in its naïve grace and tenderness that the modern school of Irish poets no longer seek to prolong the insecure vitality of the Irish tongue. It is not for nothing that Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats and Coleridge were born in England; they stand for something without which England and the English mind could not be completely understood. They, and a host of others of whom they are types, are there as a permanent reminder that matter-of-fact practicality, mechanical ingenuity, masterful self-assertion, political sagacity, and shrewd common sense, do not exhaust the gifts and qualities of English mentality ; that in the nature of the English child, out of which, largely by the aid of the teacher, the future manhood and womanhood of England are to be evolved, there lurk implicit capacities also for responding to, or even initiating, the imaginative vision which does not add to the material satisfactions of life, but extorts through symbol and figure its rich significance ; which does not make money, or further trade, but creates a spiritual wealth that liberates from the bondage of narrow cares and the burden of petty thoughts. And yet these glaringly contrasted aims have a hidden affinity and nexus. English poetry, as a whole, is distinguished by its close bearing upon reality ; its drama mirrors the age and body of the time ; its visionary songs are no vagaries of sweet tune, but a significant music, charged with implicit 'criticism of life'. For the English people, the culture which its own literature affords is the companionship not of alien genius but of its own best moments, the finer spirit of its own ruling temper, the explicit affirmation of its instinctive but vague surmises.

If, then, literature is the clue to an understanding of the national life of a unique kind, and if our own national life is, as, without any blustering patriotism, we must admit it to be, of great and enduring significance in the history of civilization and of mankind, the claim of the study of English literature to be reckoned an indispensable part of what are called in education the *Humanities*, standing on at least equal terms with any other class of *Literae Humaniores*, must surely be allowed. The number of those who have no access to humanity through the classics, or who have access to the classics but fail to extract even a glimmer of humanity out of them, is, and will always be, vast. But English literature is still, even in many great and progressive schools, the slighted Cinderella, for whom anything, and any one, is good enough. When England at length comes to comprehend that education, in the largest sense of the word, is her greatest need, I look forward confidently to the day when that slighted Cinderella will, in the great phrase of Ben Jonson, be 'stripped of the rags wherewith the times have adulterated her form'; and I shall not shrink through any fear of hyperbole from adding his final words : 'and rendered worthy to be embraced and kissed of all the great and master spirits of the world'.



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